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Spooks and Scholars

Its name is the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence (CSI). Its 25 founding members are academics drawn primarily from the social sciences.* Its existence dates from the spring of 1979, a time when U.S. intelligence agencies, the CIA and FBI in particular, had been in the doghouse for several years. Some members of Congress and then-Vice President Walter Mondale were even prepared to lock up the doghouse for good and throw away the key.

It is no exaggeration to say that this assault on the CIA and FBI—indeed, upon the very concept of intelligence itself—marked the first time, certainly in modern history, that the leadership of a large country deliberately undertook a campaign of unilateral intelligence disarmament at the same time that another country, a sworn adversary, was multiplying its intelligence armament.

We will never fully know what this anti-intelligence campaign meant to American security—and what it still means. In the light of ever-increasing Soviet KGB activity, however, some of which was detected by depleted U.S. counterintelligence forces and some exposed by sheer accident, e.g., the Falcon and the Snowman, it is safe to assume that for almost a decade the KGB never had it so good. Hence, the CSI's underlying theme, "Intelligence Requirements for the 1980s": What can be done to restore the structures of U.S. intelligence and counterintelligence to some effectiveness?

Intelligence, of course, is one of the most misunderstood functions of democratic governments, particularly in the United States where the CIA is barely 35 years old. A major cause of this misperception has been the unwillingness of most American universities to include, as part of their curriculum, any discussion of intelligence and its relation to the government's decision-making machinery. Intelligence has been a no-no, the untouchable, unteachable area in the academy, despite the fact that intelligence—for good or ill—is integral to the foreign policy of any modern nation. One reason—ideology notwithstanding—for the paucity of academic research on intelligence has been that reliable information about the elements of intelligence has hitherto been unavailable, aside from sensational exposés by former agents such as Philip Agee, Thomas Braden, Victor Marchetti, and others. Certainly, what information was available until the mid-1970s would hardly have met acceptable standards for a doctoral dissertation. However, a flood of material, formerly classified, became publicly available in the wake of House and Senate intelligence committee investigations, new legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, and the presidential guidelines for the CIA and FBI.

The academics who formed CSI were no experts in intelligence; they were teachers of law, history, and political science concerned that neither they nor the informed public, nor even the intelligence community itself, understood the function of intelligence in an open society. They proposed two tasks for the Consortium: first, to encourage objective, scholarly, unclassified research into the relationship between intelligence, foreign policy, and U.S. decision-making; second, to provide "an institutional focus for a balanced, coherent understanding of the role of intelligence in a free society."

Underlying these themes is a consensus that intelligence is not some luxury a democratic government can do without, even though it can be argued that a successful intelligence establishment in a democratic society is virtually impossible to come by. While some issues in public life can be envisioned as solvable—"solutions" to poverty, busing, abortion, recession—the functioning of the CIA or the FBI in a free society is not one of them.

The main difficulty today derives from the fantasy that we can somehow pass a law to establish an intelligence agency composed of nature's noblemen, and that under the supervision of keen-eyed, close-mouthed congressional oversight committees everything will work out as it should.

Unfortunately, all my years of study have convinced me that there are no two ways about it. You either believe in the need for a CIA despite all the concomitant problems and the CIA's own self-inflicted wounds, or you do not, preferring rather "spy-in-the-sky" surveillance of the USSR, which is about as valid as promises of "pie-in-the-sky."

*Among the academics are Professors Adda B. Bozeman, Samuel P. Huntington, John Norton Moore, Robert Nisbet, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Richard E. Pipes, Antonin Scalia, Paul Seabury, Allen Weinstein, and James Q. Wilson. Professor Roy Godson of Georgetown University and the National Strategy Information Center has been CSI coordinator from its inception.

Arnold Beichman, a founding member of the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, will be a visiting Scholar at the Hoover Institution this fall.

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Further, I am persuaded that controls over intelligence agencies are difficult to enforce. If after five years of congressional oversight, there is no scandal, no hue and cry about the CIA or FBI, no newspaper exposés, then you can be sure that the intelligence agencies have failed in their mission: namely, as Ray Cline has written, in providing "properly evaluated information from all sources, however collected." An intelligence agency, if it is to function at all, must always test the outermost limits of its legitimate powers. If it adheres to the letter of the law, it will not function. The KGB will see to that. If we are not prepared to have a CIA which occasionally will operate outside the law and with nobody the wiser, then we'd be better off without an intelligence agency. The CIA, as Norman Podhoretz has described it, represents "the main institutional capability the nation possesses for conducting a covert policy of containment."

These, of course, are my views, not necessarily shared either by CSI or any of its members. But these points have been raised at CSI meetings and will be again next fall in a special session devoted to the problem of "domestic intelligence." These meetings follow two rules:

First, no secrecy to the proceedings. Neither the papers presented, nor the commentaries, debates, or discussions are classified. The proceedings are published in book form for public sale.

Second, papers on various intelligence topics are commissioned and assigned to experts, no matter whether they are ex-CIA officers, congressional staffers, or academics.

The first symposium, April 27-28, 1979, in Washington, D.C., introduced the subject "Elements of Intelligence"—covert action, clandestine collection, counterintelligence, analysis, and estimates—all of which are, of course, interrelated. The participants included nine academics, twelve former CIA and other intelligence agency officers, and eight congressional committee staffers, among others.

Since then, four other symposia have been held, also in Washington, each one dealing with one of the major elements of intelligence. Five volumes of the proceedings have already been published.† After two years of experience, CSI's members decided to survey several hundred universities to see whether there was any interest in a teaching seminar on intelligence for full-time university teachers. The response was favorable. In July 1981, twenty-five faculty members from American universities convened for eight days at Bowdoin College in Maine to study and discuss the subject matter of the CSI symposia and how to turn the material into academic courses, complete with bibliography, reading lists, and examination questions. Another faculty seminar is scheduled this summer again at Bowdoin.

That CSI is determined to foster awareness about intelligence among social scientists does not mean that CSI is a crew of ideological academics full of Mittyesque dreams of espionage. Indeed, if there had been such a grasp of intelligence during the 1950s, and if there had been objective academic study and analysis of U.S. intelligence even with what material was then available, much of the unpleasantness that emerged during the congressional investigations of the 1970s might have been avoided—and much of the subsequent injury, some of it perhaps irreparable, to American intelligence as well.

—Arnold Beichman

†The five volumes, Elements of Intelligence, Covert Action, Counterintelligence, Analysis and Estimates, Clandestine Collection, are available from Transaction Books, New Brunswick, N.J. or the National Strategy Information Center, 1730 Rhode Island Ave., Washington, D.C. 20036.